



www.sfgate.com

[Return to regular view](#)

On the roads of the capital, a taste for the foreign

CALVIN WOODWARD, Associated Press Writer

Friday, August 30, 2002

©2002 Associated Press

URL: <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/news/archive/2002/08/30/national1424EDT0649.DTL>

(08-30) 22:26 PDT (AP) --

With BC-Wheels-Glance

WASHINGTON (AP) -- The treasury secretary tools around in his Audi roadster. Congressman Honda drives a Toyota. The secretary of state's taste in cars is as international as his job.

Americans love their cars, all right. And in cities like Washington, the foreigner, the better.

People here don't see eye to eye with the heartland when it comes to choice of wheels. In the Midwest, they drive American. Here, people like cars that come from even farther away than Detroit.

The limousines that glide through Washington darkly may be as American as the flags snapping from some of their gleaming black hoods. Out back, in exclusive government parking spots, it's a different story.

A workday stroll along parking enclaves just outside the shared grounds of the White House, Treasury Department and Old Executive Office Building finds, in one typical stretch, a BMW next to a Volvo next to a Nissan Xterra SUV and then, finally, a Ford Expedition.

Followed by a BMW, a Porsche Boxter with the vanity license plate "Tax Nerd," and more exotica. Ari Fleischer, President Bush's spokesman, drives a Saab.

Less expensive imports line parking spaces elsewhere downtown. Research finds that Washington is one of the strongest markets in the country for imports and one of the weakest for domestic brands.

"The Washington area is a very open-minded community," says Toyota spokeswoman Martha Voss.

Secretary of State Colin Powell, a longtime "Volvo nut" and amateur mechanic, once owned three Volvos, an aide says. Powell tinkered on them to relieve stress when he was chairman of the joint chiefs of staff. He's now down to one Volvo.

A Chrysler PT Cruiser, a hot retro model, is one of his latest acquisitions.

And therein lies a problem: These days, what's an American car?

The Cruiser is built in Mexico for Chrysler, the American nameplate still considered one of North America's Big Three automakers despite its ownership by DaimlerChrysler of Germany.

Although a Japanese company, Toyota this summer celebrated production of its 10 millionth vehicle made by its North American factories.

And Ford owns Volvo.

This, at least, is not an American car: Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill's silver two-seater Audi TT, a German brand with no U.S. factories.

With three young children, Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham and his wife, from the big automaking state of Michigan, drive Chrysler minivans nine and five years old.

"His father-in-law worked on the Chrysler production line for 39 years, so they will always drive a Chrysler," said spokeswoman Jeanne Lopatto.

There is no mistaking the heritage of Tommy Thompson's choice of wheels. The health and human services secretary, a former Wisconsin governor, favors his 1997 Harley-Davidson Fat Boy motorcycle. "Made right there in Milwaukee," said spokesman Tony Jewell.

President Bush drives a white Ford F-250 Super Duty pickup on his Texas ranch.

According to Scarborough Research, 75 percent of American adults have American vehicles and 43 percent have imports. The overlap is because some people have both.

In Washington, 65 percent of adults have U.S. cars, the fifth worst market for domestic vehicles in the country. Fifty-five percent have foreign cars.

In contrast, barely 10 percent of adults drive a foreign car in some areas of the Midwest auto belt.

For simplicity, market researchers count models of the American car companies as American cars and foreign-owned brands as imports, regardless of where they are made.

Rep. Mike Honda's Toyota Prius is made in Japan.

He's one of a half dozen members of Congress who own the gas-electric hybrid.

"My cute Prius," the California Democrat said dryly, summing up what his wife likes best about it. "She says, 'Oh, it's cute.' That's the only criteria."

Honda went to a Toyota dealer and mentioned to the salesman, wouldn't it make a great commercial -- a man with his name buying a Toyota? That apparently didn't get him a discount but he bought the car anyway.

And, yes, Honda owns a Honda, too.

He once had the first-generation Honda hybrid, the Insight; his wife drives a Civic wagon and they've got a GMC Safari van, as well.

Sen. Paul Wellstone, D-Minn., moves around town in a 1990 red Chrysler LeBaron convertible with only two hubcaps, the occasional transmission hiccup and duct tape patching the roof.

"He would challenge anyone to find a more loyal automobile," said spokeswoman Allison Dobson.

Some in Congress won't drive imports. Indeed, several Michigan Democrats insist their staff come to work in an American-made, union-made car.

Others are sensitive about being seen in anything too fancy.

Sure, D.C. Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton travels in a whispery 2002 silver-gray Lincoln LS. But spokeswoman Doxie McCoy hastened to note, "She drives the smallest Lincoln that there is."

Democratic Sen. Tom Harkin of Iowa has an early 1990s blue Ford Taurus. "It's the most practical vehicle," said spokesman Bill Burton.

"If Sen. Harkin's No. 1 priority was to look good on the road, he would have chosen a different vehicle. He's not out cruising the strip in his blue Taurus."

©2002 Associated Press